

# **On Marcus Clarke: The Literary Adventures of a Wayward Bohemian**

**A Commemorative Essay Written by Marcus D. Niski on The Occasion of  
the 170<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary of The Melbourne Athenaeum To Celebrate and  
Acknowledge Marcus Clarke's Life and Contribution to The Development of  
The Melbourne Athenaeum, Victoria's Oldest Cultural Institution (Est.  
1839).**

**By Marcus D. Niski**

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# On Marcus Clarke: The Literary Adventures of a Wayward Bohemian<sup>1</sup>

‘Genius has an imperialism of its own...’

– *Edmund La Touche Armstrong*<sup>2</sup>

‘I may tell you that we think a deal  
more of Marcus Clarke in our country  
than I am sorry to think you do here.’

– *Mark Twain*, 1895<sup>3</sup>

By Marcus D. Niski<sup>4</sup>

Marcus Clarke – bohemian, *bon vivant*, poet, journalist, novelist, bibliophile, *flâneur* and *agent provocateur* – remains one of the most important figures of early Australian literature, journalism and writing. Indeed, Clarke’s life resembles a sort of literary shooting star that shone all too brightly over the skies of Melbourne’s early literary scene; its brief yet radiant light tragically extinguished in spite of the majestic facility of its illumination.

In the present essay on Marcus Clarke, I wish to focus on a number of elements in Clarke’s life and writing including – his early life in Australia; his establishment in journalism and his contributions as an acute Melbourne social observer; his involvement in public affairs and, most particularly in the present case, his involvement with The Melbourne Athenaeum in the 1870’s during which time he served as a Board member as well as participating in the work of various Sub-Committees. Finally, I will chart the course of Clarke’s untimely mortal demise at the tragically young age of thirty-five.

Accordingly, in this the 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the formation of The Melbourne Athenaeum, it seems only fitting to reflect on Marcus Clarke’s contribution to the Athenaeum as a landmark Victorian cultural institution, as well as recognise his influence on the foundations of Melbourne’s literary and social landscape.

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Marcus Andrew Hislop Clarke was born on 24 April 1846 at 11 Leonard Place, Kensington, London, the only child of William Hislop Clarke and Amelia Elizabeth Matthews. Clarke’s father, a Chancery barrister who had chambers at No 1 Lincoln’s Inn Fields,<sup>5</sup> seemingly had a flourishing legal practice in London, and young Marcus’s future appeared outwardly to have been well assured.

However, William Hislop Clarke’s sudden physical and mental breakdown – through what appears to have been some form of degenerative brain disease – saw Marcus’ world rapidly crumble around him, his father later removed to an asylum known as Northumberland House in 1862 where he died about a year later.<sup>6</sup>

Far from been securely well endowed, the young Marcus Clarke “was left almost destitute,”<sup>7</sup> as his father’s finances appeared to be in a parlous state to say the

least. Accordingly, the cruel twist of fate that occurred in the death of Marcus' father would come to have a profound impact on the whole course of Marcus Clarke's life.

As a consequence of this catastrophic family breakdown, and urged by relatives who could see no immediate resolution to young Marcus' fortunes in England, Marcus Clarke emigrated to Australia where his uncle, Justice James Langton Clarke, was a judge in the western district of Victoria at Ararat<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, Clarke arrived on Melbourne's shores in June of 1863<sup>9</sup> as a mere seventeen-year-old.

As Clarke would autobiographically reflect in *Human Repetends* (1872): –

My father died suddenly in London, and to the astonishment of the world left me nothing. His expenditure had been large, but as he left no debts, his income must have been proportionate to his expenditure. The source of this income, however, it was impossible to discover. An examination of his bankers' book showed only that large sums (always in notes or gold) had been lodged and drawn out, but no record of speculations or investments could be found among his papers ... My relatives said "Something must be done," and invited me to stop at their houses until that vague substantiality should be realised, and offers of employment were generously made; but to all proposals I replied with sudden disdain, and, desirous only of avoiding those who had known me in my prosperity, I avowed my resolution of going to Australia.<sup>10</sup>

Upon his initial arrival the young Marcus Clarke would absorb his time reading, writing and trawling the second-hand bookshops of Melbourne. As Elliot suggests, Clarke would have been enthralled by such delights, "Second-hand bookshops were his treasure-trove at this time. There was plenty of choice. The shops were full of the sad wreckage of gentleman's libraries..."<sup>11</sup>

Clarke's first employment in Australia would be that of bank clerk at the Bank of Australasia as encouraged with the help of his uncle, Judge Clarke.<sup>12</sup> Clarke's banking career would ultimately be short-lived, as his intellectually precocious nature would soon see him in trouble with the staid nature of banking life. Indeed, Clarke would soon begin to display some of the early characteristics of his wit and temperament that would so often cause him trouble in later adult life. While Clarke was "the life and soul of the office during his brief novitiate,"<sup>13</sup> he would find "life in the bank irksome"<sup>14</sup> even though it would later lead him to pen some "amusing impressions of the experience."<sup>15 16</sup>

The next major turning point in Clarke's life would undoubtedly come in the form of his appointment to the staff of *The Argus* newspaper in February 1867.<sup>17</sup> According to Elliot, 'legend' – as referred to in Hamilton Mackinnon's memoirs<sup>18</sup> – suggests that Clarke had been appointed to *The Argus* "on the recommendation

of a friend, [a] Dr Robert Lewins...”<sup>19</sup> to the proprietor of the *The Argus*, Mr Lachlan Mackinnon. Lewins, a visiting British army Staff Surgeon (attached to General Chute in New Zealand), had apparently ‘discovered’ and encouraged the young Clarke’s journalistic talents. What actual role Lewins had in Clarke’s appointment, if any, seems to me to be unclear. Clarke had also begun to write articles on both literary and philosophical subjects for a Melbourne literary journal, the *Australasian*,<sup>20</sup> which included pieces on ‘Balzac and Modern French Literature’<sup>21</sup> and an essay on Gustave Doré.<sup>22</sup>

### **‘Upper’ and ‘Lower’ Bohemia**

During 1867, the major daily Melbourne paper *The Argus* employed Clarke as a theatre critic. However, the rigours of routine work did not sit well with his flamboyant bohemian temperament and his full-time employment was apparently terminated when Clarke turned in a review of a play, which unbeknown to him, had actually been cancelled!<sup>23</sup> Subsequently released from the bondage of routine imposed upon staff reporters and “reduced to the rank of a contributor,”<sup>24</sup> Clarke began to pen his observations on Melbourne life in the colony to the *Australasian* under the rather dandified title of ‘*The Peripatetic Philosopher*’, signed by ‘Q’.

Undoubtedly Clarke’s most successful journalistic persona, his ‘Peripatetic Philosopher’ would prove to be an immediate success. As Elliot suggests, “For so young a writer its triumph was phenomenal.”<sup>25</sup> Setting himself up as “a kind of Melbourne Diogenes inhabiting a gas pipe at Coles wharf...”<sup>26</sup> and cheekily adopting the mysterious *nom de plume* of ‘Q’<sup>27</sup> in his initial instalment<sup>28</sup>, Clarke’s column – which ran from 23 November 1867 to 11 June 1870<sup>29</sup> – encouraged both his wit, his waywardness, and his pretentious temperament in his willingness to lampoon many aspects of Melbourne society and its institutions.

While such “literary cocktails”<sup>30</sup> in the form of Clarke’s ‘Peripatetic Philosopher’ undoubtedly sated the writer’s passions for wit and lampoonery, Clarke’s journalism also served as a major springboard for his explorations of the evolving *metropolitan* and social character of colonial Melbourne, as well as its ‘subterranean’ underbelly.

Stylistically influenced by the great European writers and journalists such as the likes of Hugo, Balzac, Sala and Dickens, Clarke’s explorations of ‘Lower Bohemia,’ are remarkable in their insight, articulation and observation. Trawling through Melbourne’s backstreets, lanes and dens, Clarke documents a fascinating slice of Melbourne life in the raw that would no doubt both intrigue and shock his readers in equal measure. Accordingly, Melbourne’s street scenes at night, a pawnbrokers shop on a Saturday night, a night at the immigrants’ home, and a tour of the Chinese quarter with its gambling and opium dens, all make scintillating fodder for Clarke’s insightful pen. As Clarke would write in a portrait sketch of one of his forays into ‘Lower Bohemia’ in ‘A NIGHT AT THE IMMIGRANTS’ HOME’, “I will take you, Dante-like, [on] an excursion through a real Inferno, where rags, and poverty, and drunkenness, and crime and misery,

all huddle together; where poor Rose Pompon is asleep in the gutter, and Monsieur Couche-tout-nu is worthy of his name...”<sup>31</sup>

Yet, Clarke’s *raison d’être* appears not entirely to be devoted to social exposé, but also to pecuniary reward as well; given like many writers – and little seems changed amongst his contemporaries of today [!] – his income would have wildly varied.<sup>32</sup> In a fascinating revelation to the reader in a piece entitled ‘LE ROI S’AMUSE’<sup>33</sup>, Clarke’s motivations for writing his social observations are revealed to his audience with a surprising and splendid candour: “My object in writing these papers is twofold – First to make money; second, to give you a faithful impression of the true life of Melbourne bohemia; and I think the latter object will be best achieved by painting for you the picture, and leaving you to draw the moral for yourself.”<sup>34</sup>

As Andrew McCann rightly suggests in his entry on Marcus Clarke for *The Literary Encyclopedia*, Clarke’s literary excursions into ‘Lower Bohemia’ deserve to be recognised as important contributions to the canon of early Australian journalism and writing, “These sketches are both landmarks in documentary journalism and in the literature of the grotesque.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, as David Conley also points out in his excellent analysis of the relationship between Clarke’s journalism and his *mode of writing* as a novelist, Clarke’s “back street journalism [undoubtedly] foreshadowed his seminal novel...[*For The Term of His Natural Life*].”<sup>36</sup>

Strikingly, even today, Clarke’s evocative style would sit well with the invocation of contemporary American writer Gay Talese’s form of ‘New Journalism’ that would arrive some hundred years later: “Seek a larger truth than is possible through *the mere compilation of the facts* [my emphasis added].”<sup>37</sup>

### **‘His Natural Life’**

While Clarke’s journalistic pursuits would captivate and hold the attention of a wide reading audience amongst the citizens of colonial Melbourne, undoubtedly his greatest enduring literary success would be his epic serialised novel *His Natural Life*. Conley’s insightful article on the relationship between Clarke’s journalism and his novel writing in *Marcus Clarke: the romance of reality*, suggests that it is difficult to argue against the notion that the realism in Clarke’s journalism would provide *the* major springboard for his fiction writing endeavours.<sup>38</sup>

The odyssey that would eventually lead to the publication of *His Natural Life* began with an approach to the publisher of the *Australian Journal* in which Clarke proposed to write a serialised novel around the theme of a tale “full of thrilling incidents relating to the old convict days in Tasmania.”<sup>39</sup> Massina’s<sup>40</sup> reaction is documented in an interview which he gave in the *Melbourne Herald*, 2 March 1909 as is recounted by Elliot: “...Clarke came in one day and said, ‘Massina, I want £50.’ ‘Oh,’ said the publisher, you’ve had enough out of me. ‘What more do you want?’ ‘£50!’ Clarke replied. ‘I can write a story for your journal. I am going to Tasmania to write up the criminal records, and I’ll do it for £100. ‘We jumped at it’, Massina added.”<sup>41</sup>

Clarke thus set out for Tasmania accompanied by fellow journalistic prodigy Frederick William Haddon in order to facilitate the necessary research. At this time there were still a number of remnant prisoners occupying the notorious buildings at Port Arthur where Clarke would set about exploring with much wide-eyed intrigue.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Clarke would write a distinct piece about this episode entitled *Port Arthur Visited, 1870* that would appear in *The Argus* in three instalments in July 1873.<sup>43</sup> Having initially embarked on the journey “in the light of a holiday jaunt”<sup>44</sup> the pair would undoubtedly be sobered by the experience.

The serialised version of *His Natural Life* would run in instalments in the *Australian Journal* over two years between March 1870 and June 1872.<sup>45</sup> In its serialised form, however, *His Natural Life* was not the success that was hoped for and the magazine indeed lost circulation, although ironically, this was reversed when the serial was again reprinted between 1881-1883 directly after Clarke’s tragic demise.<sup>46</sup>

When published in the form of a novel under the initial title of *His Natural Life* the book over time would prove to be an outstanding success. First published by George Robertson in Melbourne in 1874, a subsequent edition was published by Bentley of London in the following year.<sup>47</sup> A revised edition would later be published in 1884 (after Clarke’s death) – again by George Robertson in Melbourne and Bentley of London – under the title of *For The Term Of His Natural Life* that would become the ‘standard’ title of the book.<sup>48</sup> Before preparing the book for its initial publication, Clarke would consult Mr (later Sir) Charles Gavan Duffy – a distinguished member of the Victorian parliament and trustee of the Public Library<sup>49</sup> – who would suggest some important and dramatic revisions to the manuscript that would see the book version becoming a much finer product.

While much literary ink has been spilt over the nature and qualities of *His Natural Life* as a work, Hamilton Mackinnon fittingly summarises the enduring nature of Clarke’s legacy: “As without doubt this [*His Natural Life*] is the best and most sustained effort of Marcus Clarke’ genius, and one upon which will chiefly rest his fame in literature...”<sup>50</sup>

Today the book continues to be reprinted and has appeared in German, Russian, Dutch and Swedish translations, achieving the status of a ‘classic’ amongst publishers lists and testifying to the truly international nature of the book’s fame.<sup>51</sup>

### **Clarke ‘The Yoricker’**

Apart from his intense writing, journalistic, publishing, and nocturnal sojourns as a distinguished Melbourne *flâneur*, Clarke was also involved in a wide scope of activities that ranged from the promotion of *bonhomie* and general mischief between fellow *littérateurs*, to the more serious side of forging a cultural and literary life amongst the community of Melbourne’s citizens.

As a founding member of the Yorick Club,<sup>52</sup> Clarke alongside a number of his contemporaries, set about corralling a number of like-minded journalists and writers together to form a club where they could meet together under convivial circumstances. Indeed, as Joseph Johnson points out ‘The inspirational spark to form the Yorick Club basically came from writers who were working journalists.’<sup>53</sup> Such literary figures of the day included a wide range of ‘personalities’ and characters including – Adam Lindsay Gordon, George McCrae (father of Hugh McCrae<sup>54</sup>), J.J Shillinglaw, F.W Haddon, Alfred Telo, and Thomas Carrington along with a cast of many others.<sup>55</sup>

The club’s ‘mascot’ was a human skull: “And the Club did have the appropriate talisman – ‘It was a remarkable skull, as brown as mahogany, on the mantelpiece where Clarke had put it with a churchwarden stuck between its teeth.” It was eventually donated to the Theatre Royal as a prop.<sup>56</sup>

The Yorick Club flourished for some 98 years until it was eventually amalgamated into The Melbourne Savage Club<sup>57</sup> that continues today. <sup>58</sup>

### **The Melbourne Athenaeum**

Aside from the tenacious pursuit of his literary, cultural and bohemian activities, Marcus Clarke was also an active member on the General Committee of management of The Melbourne Athenaeum in the years 1876 to 1878. Initially formed as the ‘The Melbourne Mechanics’ Institution’ on 12 November 1839,<sup>59</sup> The Melbourne Athenaeum as it was later re-named on 30 October 1872, is Victoria’s oldest continuously established cultural institution. Whilst Clarke had joined The Melbourne Athenaeum in 1873, he did not stand for nomination for the General Committee of Management until 1876.<sup>60</sup>

On 25 January 1876, Marcus Clarke was nominated for the General Committee of Management at the Athenaeum’s Annual General Committee Meeting and his nomination was successful. Out of the 21 applicants, seven were elected, with Clarke receiving 44 votes – an equal first with Mr J S Butters.<sup>61</sup>

In that same year, fellow bohemian, *littérateur*, pantomimist, and publisher Garnet Walch was Secretary to The Melbourne Athenaeum. Walch was a rather flamboyant character in his own right, and a member of Clarke’s “bohemian circle.”<sup>62</sup> Recommended for the position of Secretary by none other than (Sir) Henry Parkes, Walch’s tenure spanned between the years 1873–1879, having secured the position from a field of 115 applicants.<sup>63</sup> Throughout his office Walch is said to have increased both the membership and revenue at the Athenaeum by a three-fold number.<sup>64</sup> <sup>65</sup> Ultimately, Walch would resign from his position in 1879 to focus on the preparation of his opus *Victoria in 1880*, which, due to financial difficulties, appeared in the following year.<sup>66</sup>

Marcus Clarke’s activities on the General Committee of Management might be described as both vigorous, yet sometimes inconsistent – particularly with respect to his attendance in 1878 – where he “was absent for all but one out of 13

meetings held.”<sup>67</sup> An analysis of the Minutes and printed Annual Reports between the years 1876-1879, suggests that Clarke was active in number of areas within The Melbourne Athenaeum’s organizational and management activities including the Rules Sub-Committee<sup>68</sup>; The Library Sub-Committee<sup>69</sup>; the Social Evenings Sub-Committee<sup>70</sup>; the House Sub-Committee<sup>71</sup>; Emergency Sub-Committee<sup>72</sup> and the Improvements Sub-Committee.<sup>73</sup> Clarke’s achievements on the General Committee of Management at The Melbourne Athenaeum span across a number of areas within the Athenaeum’s literary and cultural life. Indeed, as the Minutes and Annual Reports show, 1876 and 1877 had been particularly busy year for Clarke in his involvements with both the business of the General Committee of Management as well as its various Sub-Committees.<sup>74</sup>

As Chairman of the Library Sub-committee<sup>75</sup> at the General Committee Meeting on 6 November 1876, Clarke had been responsible for preparing a new library catalogue for the Athenaeum Library during that year. Accordingly, Clarke had “presented the manuscript of the new catalogue that was ordered to be printed,”<sup>76</sup> and at the General Committee Meeting of 12 February 1877, Clarke was formally thanked “for the trouble taken by him (Clarke) in connection with the new catalogue. The motion was carried.”<sup>77</sup> The Chairman also “...conveyed the vote of thanks to Mr Clarke who suitably acknowledged it.”<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the next day *The Argus* carried a roundup story of the “usual monthly meeting of the committee of The Melbourne Athenaeum” that also referred to Clarke’s efforts: “...the new catalogue of the library was laid on the table by the secretary and a vote of thanks passed to the committee to Mr Marcus Clarke for his services in connexion with the compilation of it.”<sup>79</sup>

In 1876, Clarke had also played an important role in the Rules Sub-Committee and was responsible for having “had devised, debated, revised and had printed the new Rules of 1876. For one meeting he took the chair.”<sup>80</sup> On 24 August 1876, a Special General Meeting of members was held in the Large Hall, “to adopt the revised rules of the Institution.”<sup>81</sup> Clarke had also lobbied during 1876 to have the Reading Room open on Sundays from 1pm – 3pm and had recommended that the Rules be altered to allow for this.

The Reading Room was an important feature in the life of The Melbourne Athenaeum as it contained a range of British and colonial newspapers, journals and magazines and was very popular amongst the members.<sup>82</sup> The motion was carried at the General Committee Meeting of 3 April 1876 with six for and three against. However, whilst Clarke’s motion at the 3 April 1876 meeting had initially been successful in having the Rules amended to allow for the Reading Room to be open on Sundays, a Special General Meeting of Members on 24<sup>th</sup> August saw Clarke’s adjustment to Rule 50<sup>83</sup> re-amended by a motion by Mr Meeks (moved) and Mr Butters (seconded) which adopted “Rule 50 as follows: “The Library of Circulation shall be opened daily from 8.30am till 9 pm, excepting Saturday, when it shall be closed at 2pm and *excepting Sunday*, Christmas Day, Boxing Day New Year's Day Good Friday, Easter Monday, Queens Birthday, Prince of Wales Birthday and all other day or days as the Committee shall think fit. Carried” [my italics added]<sup>84</sup>.



In 1876, the General Committee meeting of 3 July 1876 had also appointed Clarke to the Improvements Sub-Committee.<sup>85</sup> Prior to his formal appointment to this Sub Committee that had considered “sketch plans” for proposed new building alterations, Clarke had called upon the Sub-Committee that they “... consider designs other than those at present asked for provided no expense be thereby incurred.” The motion was thereby carried.<sup>86</sup> It is also a fascinating historical aside that at this same meeting a motion was passed to purchase an “...iron safe, price not to exceed twenty guineas.” That very safe today still rests in a corner of The Melbourne Athenaeum Library!<sup>87</sup> Clarke had also taken an active interest in the maintenance and development of The Melbourne Athenaeum building and at the General Committee Meeting of 5 March 1877, Clarke as Chairman of the Improvements Sub Committee presented the Sub-Committee’s report of 19 February 1877. The Sub Committee report recommended: “1. That a scheme for the completion of the front of the building at a cost not to exceed £6000 be considered as soon as possible. 2. That pending proposed completion of the front of building, the western offices be converted to a “newspaper room” for the accommodation of subscribers using the Melbourne and colonial newspapers, leaving the present room free for readers of books and periodicals. On the motion of Mr Marcus Clarke seconded by Mr Biers the Improvement Sub Committee’s report was adopted.”<sup>88</sup> Whether such a ‘conversion’ ever took place is today unknown.<sup>89</sup>

By 6 May 1878, the General Committee had received a letter from Mr Marcus Clarke resigning his position as a member on the grounds of inability to attend meetings. However, at the General Committee meeting of 3 June 1878, the Library Sub-Committee presented their report of 30 May 1878 and, with respect to Clarke, “The Vice President reported that in compliance with instructions for the General Committee he had waited on Marcus Clarke with the office letter committee requesting him (Marcus Clarke) to withdraw his resignation to which Mr Clarke consented. Mr Marcus Clarke’s letter of resignation was accordingly withdrawn.”<sup>90</sup>

It is also intriguing to note that the issue of what constitutes ‘non-attendance’ had been raised on 3 April 1876 in a Rules Sub-Committee Progress Report that contained a question as to “What constitutes attendance on the part of a member of the Committee?”<sup>91</sup> One might happily speculate that Clarke had postulated this question in anticipation of his poor attendance in the future due to his insatiably heavy commitment of activities that no doubt often outstretched even his capacities for work and social engagements?

While Marcus Clarke’s attendance, particularly towards the end of his service on the General Committee was sometimes inconsistent, Clarke undoubtedly made a vibrant contribution to the activities of The Melbourne Athenaeum; an institution which he clearly had a great deal of affinity with and whose name he will eternally be associated with.

### **The Public Library**

Three years prior to his joining The Melbourne Athenaeum, Clarke would be appointed to the position of Secretary to the Trustees of The Public Library, Museum and National Gallery as it was then known – all three institutions having been amalgamated under the one trusteeship in December 1869.<sup>92</sup> As a “kind of protégé”<sup>93</sup> of Sir Redmond Barry who was then Chairman of Trustees, Clarke was a favoured son whose literary talents were prized above those of his propensity for waywardness, particularly those of his detractors who would have seen him as a liability in any position of authority and responsibility.<sup>94</sup>

But Clarke’s motivations were more sober in as much as the drive for a regular stream of income: a Faustian bargain in as much as Clarke had to be seen at least initially to curtail some of his literary activities, as is reflected in him giving up his beloved ‘Peripatetic Philosopher’: “I have sold my birthright of free speech for a mess of official pottage, and so to all intents and purposes my “Peripatetic” is dead.”<sup>95</sup>

Clarke’s efforts as Secretary were seemingly satisfactory enough to have seen him appointed to the position of Sub-Librarian in 1873.<sup>96</sup> But while Clarke’s position at the Library allowed him more or less a free reign to continue on his literary endeavours, his financial situation was becoming an intolerable burden, and Clarke was clearly sailing very close to the wind with his situation at the Library as well. In 1874, he was declared bankrupt and his position at the Library was in real jeopardy in the face of the regulations that would require his resignation as a consequence of such ‘misconduct.’<sup>97</sup> To add insult to further woe and injury, Clarke’s most treasured tools of his writers’ trade – his library of “*Rare & Choice Works*”<sup>98</sup> – were auctioned off at The Melbourne Athenaeum in order to facilitate a settlement of his debts that by now totalled to a staggering £2000. A scheme of arrangement was put in place, and when the court granted him a discharge in 27 February 1875,<sup>99</sup> Clarke was allowed to maintain his position as Sub-Librarian having avoided almost certain calamity.

While Clarke’s ultimate goal would have been to secure the position of Chief Librarian, the death of Sir Redmond Barry in November 1880 would undoubtedly prove to be a major blow towards Clarke’s ambitions. Indeed, Clarke had also turned down the position of Parliamentary Librarian and had perhaps finally fatally sabotaged his prospects of securing the Chief Librarianship through the publication of an essay on religion and education – ‘Civilization without Delusion’ – that had sparked a debate which had brought the Bishop of Melbourne, Dr James Moorhouse, into the fray.<sup>100</sup> The final blow would come as the Trustees would become embroiled in a dispute with the Berry government and the government, determined to exert its influence over the choice, would name Dr Bride, the University Librarian, as its final choice.<sup>101</sup> By July 1881, Clarke’s financial position had once again degenerated into a miserable circumstance. Having borrowed money on the strength of his potential appointment to the Chief Librarianship and, having failed to secure the position, Clarke’s second

bankruptcy now ensued.<sup>102</sup> The final slide towards mortal oblivion would come terribly soon after this devastatingly unhappy state of affairs.

### **Towards ‘The Broken Column’**

Clarke’s flamboyance was both his greatest asset and one of his strongest human failings. Dubbed by Cyril Hopkins<sup>103</sup> as a “‘kaleidoscopic, parti-coloured, harlequinesque, thaumatropic’ being,” the disposition of Clarke’s flamboyance often got him into trouble in his short and tempestuous life. Whilst he lived life to the fullest as a *flâneur*, *bon vivant* and wayward bohemian, Clarke’s spendthrift approach to his finances and his reckless, almost self-destructive pursuit of the bohemian – particularly in his earlier years – undoubtedly contributed to his ultimate demise.<sup>104</sup> Always troubled by financial problems due to his lifestyle and propensity for living well above his means, and further compounded by his inability to manage money, his behaviour at times seemed to lapse towards sometimes fatal self-sabotage at moments which would otherwise might have restored his precarious financial position. Indeed, in ‘On Borrowing Money,’<sup>105</sup> Clarke autobiographically reflects on such themes in the guise of his writing persona:

I have made a scientific discovery. I have found out the reason why I have so long been afflicted with a pecuniary flux. For many years past I have tried to find out why I am always in debt, and have consulted all sorts of financial physicians, but grew no better, but rather the worse. The temporary relief afforded by a mild loan or an overdraft at the bank soon vanished. I once thought that by the judicious application of a series of bills at three months I could cheek the ravages of disease; but, alas! my complaint was aggravated...<sup>106</sup>

Cruelly, the sands of time would soon run out for Clarke. Tragically, he died at 4pm on 2 August 1881 at the age of 35 in virtual squalor in a cottage in Inkerman Street, East St Kilda which “was bare of furniture; and there was scarcely enough money to buy medicines.”<sup>107</sup> Hamilton Mackinnon describes Clarke’s final demise:

The illness which immediately caused his decease commenced with an attack of pleurisy, and this developing into congestion of the liver, and finally into erysipelas, carried him off in the space of one short week. Indeed he had, during the last year of his life, suffered so frequently from attacks brought on by a disordered liver, that little heed was given to the final attack till a day or two previous to his death...<sup>108</sup>

As a tribute to Clarke, a *Memorial Volume* of his works was compiled and edited by Hamilton Mackinnon. Its full and lofty title bearing the words –*The Marcus Clarke Memorial Volume: containing selections from the writings of Marcus Clarke, together with Lord*

*Rosebery's letter, etc., and a biography of the deceased author* – was published by Cameron, Laing & Co., in 1884.<sup>109</sup>

While Clarke's final resting place had fallen into disrepair some years later, a group of his loyal admirers from Adelaide would eventually subscribe together to erect upon Clark's grave at the Melbourne Cemetery "...a symbolical broken column."<sup>110</sup> Here [also], thirty years after his death, his wife Marian was laid beside him."<sup>111</sup>

Clarke's life undoubtedly has many dramatic qualities to it. His genius, at times spurned,<sup>112</sup> is juxtaposed against an indomitable spirit, a character of his times who was determined to forge an Australian literature that would endure beyond the immediate limitations of its colonial roots. In this, Clarke has undoubtedly succeeded, and well beyond the efforts of his critics who chided him as being merely a 'one-book author.' Accordingly, the canon of Clarke's literary and cultural endeavours – most particularly in this case his contribution to the life and development of The Melbourne Athenaeum – is now being acknowledged and given the respect that it most surely and richly deserves.

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## Marcus Clarke: A Chronology

1839 – November 12<sup>th</sup> Mechanics Institute and School of Arts, Melbourne formed.

1846 – 24 April – Marcus Andrew Hislop Clarke – Born in Kensington, London.

1863 – 1 December – Clarke's father – William Hislop Clarke's dies in Northumberland House.

1863 – June – Clarke arrives in Melbourne.

1867 – The major daily Melbourne paper, *The Argus*, employs Clarke as a theatre critic.

1867 – 23 November to 11 June 1870 – Marcus Clarke writes his 'Peripatetic Philosopher' column in the *Australasian*.

1868 – May – Founding of the Yorick Club.

1870 – March – June 1872. The serialised version of *His Natural Life* would run in instalments in the *Australian Journal* over two years.

1870 – May – Appointed to Secretary to Trustees of the Public Library, Museum and National Gallery.

1872 – The Melbourne Mechanics' Institute and School of Arts now re-named 'The Melbourne Athenaeum.'

1873 – September – Appointed Sub-Librarian, Public Library, Melbourne.

1873 – Clarke joins The Melbourne Athenaeum Library as a member.

1873 – Garnett Walch Secretary of The Melbourne Athenaeum.

1874 – Clarke Bankrupt. The sale of his personal library at The Melbourne Athenaeum, "Saturday, August 8<sup>th</sup> at eleven o'clock comprising of many rare & choice works" (From: Auction Sale Catalogue, Rare Books, SLV).

1874 – *His Natural Life* proved to be an outstanding success when first published in revised and condensed book form by George Robertson in Melbourne, with a subsequent edition published by Bentley of London in the following year (1875).

1876–1878 – Clarke elected to, and is active on the General Committee of The Melbourne Athenaeum. He is also involved with a wide range of its Sub-

Committees including – Library; Rules; Social Evenings; House; Emergency; and Improvements Sub-Committees.

1879 – 3 March 1879, Garnet Walch resigns as Secretary of The Melbourne Athenaeum.

1880 – November – Sir Redmond Barry dies.

1881(Mid) – Clarke's second bankruptcy and 'sequestration' of his assets by the 'usurer' Aaron Waxman, (Mackinnon).

1881 – 4pm, 2 August 1881 – Clarke dies in a house at Inkerman Street, East St Kilda of pleurisy and erysipelas.

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<sup>1</sup> A Commemorative Essay Written by Marcus D. Niski on The Occasion of the 170<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The Melbourne Athenaeum To Celebrate and Acknowledge Marcus Clarke's Life and Contribution to The Development of The Melbourne Athenaeum, Victoria's Oldest Cultural Institution (Est. 1839).

<sup>2</sup> One of Marcus Clarke's 'stern critics' written in *The Book of the Public Library 1856-1906*, as cited in Burt, Sandra (2001) Op. Cit, p 55-60 at p 60.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Twain as quoted in Wilding, Michael (1977) *Marcus Clarke*, Australian Writers and Their Work, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, p3.

<sup>4</sup> Member of the Board of The Melbourne Athenaeum Inc. (2007 – 2011). The Author would like to thank the Board of 2009 – Kevin Quigley (President), Michael Herman (Vice-President), Andrew Barnes (Treasurer), Tricia Caswell, Agnes Cusack, Matthew Gisborne, Anne Malloch, Don Smith, George West and Staff Sophie Arnold (Executive Officer), Jill Bartholomeusz (Librarian) – for bestowing the honour upon me of writing this homage to Marcus Clarke and his contribution to the history, life and development of The Melbourne Athenaeum in this the 170<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year.

<sup>5</sup> See: Elliot, Brian (1958) *Marcus Clarke*, Oxford at The Clarendon Press, London, p 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p 20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p 21.

<sup>8</sup> See: Wannan, Bill Ed. (1963) *A Marcus Clarke Reader: Selections from His Lesser Known Writings*, Lansdowne Press, p viii.

<sup>9</sup> See: Hergenhan, L.T Ed. (1972) *A Colonial City: High and Low Life - Selected Journalism of Marcus Clarke*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, p. xix.

<sup>10</sup> *Human Repetends* – Author: Marcus Clarke, A Project Gutenberg of Australia eBook, eBook No.: 0601221h.html Edition: 1; Date first posted: June 2006, produced by: Richard Scott as accessed at: <http://gutenberg.net.au> at 14 August 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Elliot (1958) Op. Cit, 32

<sup>12</sup> Wannan (1963) Op. Cit, ix.

<sup>13</sup> See Elliot (1958), Op. Cit, p 38.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p 38.

<sup>15</sup> See: Elliot, Brian (1969) 'Clarke, Marcus Andrew Hislop (1846 - 1881)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, (Online Edition), accessed at <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A030392b.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Clarke's wit in drawing upon his adventures in the banking industry is demonstrated in his story 'The Brief Experiences of Mr Thomas Twopenny' in which the Bank of Australasia is transmogrified into the *Polynesian Bank* in Clarke's satire. See Elliot (1958) Op. Cit, pp 34-37

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<sup>17</sup> See: Australian Tales: Biography – Hamilton Mackinnon: *Marcus Clarke*, as accessed at: <http://telelib.com/words/authors/C/ClarkeMarcus/prose/AustralianTales/biography.html> See particularly pp 6-7. This date is disputed in Elliot (1958) who suggests that Clarke was not in Melbourne in February but does not seem to suggest a firm date in 1867 that Clarke began writing at *The Argus*. See: Elliot (1958), Op. Cit, p 78.

<sup>18</sup> See: Hamilton Mackinnon: *Marcus Clarke*, Op. Cit, see particularly pp 6-7.

<sup>19</sup> See: Elliot (1958) Op. Cit, p 78.

<sup>20</sup> Clarke's first notable journalistic contribution was a piece on the 1867 Melbourne Cup written when he was just twenty-one. See: Hergenhan, L.T Ed. (1972) Op. Cit, p xxvi and Elliot (1958) Op. Cit, p86.

<sup>21</sup> Published in August 1867 in the *Australasian* with his piece on Doré appearing the following month. See Wannan (1963) Op. Cit, p x.

<sup>22</sup> See: Wannan (1963), Op. Cit, p x.

<sup>23</sup> See: Hamilton Mackinnon's recollections in Hamilton Mackinnon: *Marcus Clarke*, Op. Cit, n.p.

<sup>24</sup> Elliot (1958) Op. Cit, p85-86

<sup>25</sup> Elliot (1958) Ibid, p 89.

<sup>26</sup> Elliot (1969) Op. Cit, n.p.

<sup>27</sup> According to Wilding (1977), 'Q' refers to the brand of Swinton station, a sheep station that Clarke had lived on during the early days of his Australian odyssey. See p5.

<sup>28</sup> See: Hergenhan (1972) Op. Cit, p1.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p xxvi.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, at p xv to cite Francis Adams' phrase as quoted by Hergenhan in his excellent Introduction to Hergenhan, L.T Ed. (1972) Op. Cit.

<sup>31</sup> *Australasian*, 12 June 1869, as reprinted in Hergenhan, L.T Ed. (1972) Op. Cit, p. 132.

<sup>32</sup> The fluctuating nature of Clarke's financial fortunes is well documented throughout Elliot (1958) including the two major crisis points of Clarke's insolvency.

<sup>33</sup> *Australasian*, 19 June 1869, as reprinted in Hergenhan, L.T Ed. (1972) Op. Cit, p. 141-146.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p 142.

<sup>35</sup> McCann, Andrew (2001) "Marcus Clarke" in *The Literary Encyclopedia* (Online), 8 January 2001, accessed at: <http://www.litencyc.com/php/people.php?rec=true&UID=905>

<sup>36</sup> See: Conley, David (2000) *Marcus Clarke: the romance of reality*, in Australian Studies in Journalism 9: p65.

<sup>37</sup> Loose, Julian (2001) 'Stranger than fiction' in *The Guardian* (Online Edition), accessed at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/jul/28/biography.highereducation>

<sup>38</sup> See: Conley, David (2000) Op. Cit, p552.

<sup>39</sup> See Elliot (1958) Op. Cit, p151.

<sup>40</sup> A. H Massina, printer, was a founding partner of Clarson, Massina & Co. and the company engaged in literary publishing as well as printing. Adam Lindsay Gordon, Henry Kendall and Marcus Clarke were amongst Massina's "able pens." Massina is credited with the decision to fund the young Marcus Clarke – then only 23 – for his visit to Tasmania in 1869. According to legend, Massina, in order to facilitate the meeting of his charge's contractual obligations is said to have "locked the brilliant and erratic author in an office, with sustaining drams of whisky, to force production of instalments [of *His Natural Life*] for the magazine [viz. the *Australian Journal*]." See: Frank Strahan (1974) 'Massina, Alfred Henry (1834-1917)', entry in Australian Dictionary of Biography Online entry as accessed at: <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A050252b.htm> 2 September 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Elliot (1958) Op. Cit, p151.

<sup>42</sup> Wannan (1963) Op. Cit, pxii. Clarke's *Port Arthur Visited, 1870* is also included in this collection at pp137-148.

<sup>43</sup> Elliot (1958) Op. Cit, p 161.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p154.

<sup>45</sup> See: Wannan (1963) Op. Cit, xii-xiii.

<sup>46</sup> Elliot (1958) Op. Cit, p162.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p165.

<sup>48</sup> See: Wilding (1977) Op. Cit, p 45.

<sup>49</sup> Elliot (1958) Op. Cit, p160.

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<sup>50</sup> See: Hamilton Mackinnon: *Marcus Clarke*, Op. Cit, n.p

<sup>51</sup> See Wilding (1977), Op. Cit, p 3. In June this year (2009) Penguin Books reissued *For the Term of His Natural Life* in its Popular Penguins series attesting to the book's enduring popularity which, as the publishers' website points out, has "Scarcely [been] out of print since the early 1870s..." See: <http://www.penguin.com.au/lookinside/spotlight.cfm?SBN=9780143202691> as accessed at 8 September 2009.

<sup>52</sup> The Yorick Club was, according to Hamilton Mackinnon (*Marcus Clarke*) founded "about May" 1868.

<sup>53</sup> Johnson, Joseph, (1994) *Laughter and the Love of Friends: A Centenary History of The Melbourne Savage Club 1894-1994 and a History of The Yorick Club 1868-1966*, Melbourne Savage Club, Melbourne, p 20.

<sup>54</sup> Hugh McCrae's reflections of his father's involvement in the Yorick Club are particularly readable. See: McCrae, Hugh (1935) *My Father, and My Father's Friends*, Angus and Robertson Limited, Sydney, p34-38.

<sup>55</sup> See Johnson (1994) *List of Founding Members*, Ibid, p23.

<sup>56</sup> See Johnson (1994), Ibid, p23. Clarke had originally wanted to call the club the 'Golgotha Club' as a reference to "the place of skulls" but Yorick became the compromise; although it seems that Clarke at least appears to have been a little miffed over the final settling on the name 'Yorick'. See Elliot (1958), p102 ff and Johnson (1994) Ibid, p 23.

<sup>57</sup> See: Victorian Heritage Database – *Melbourne Savage Club*, VHR Number H0025, as accessed at: <http://vhd.heritage.vic.gov.au/places/heritage/697>

<sup>58</sup> Clarke would apparently withdraw increasingly from the Yorick to later form the 'Cave of Adullam.' See Elliot (1958) pp-210-214.

<sup>59</sup> The first 'official' mention of the name 'Melbourne Mechanics' Institution', however, is recorded in 27 November 1839 minutes: "Proposed by Mr McArthur seconded by Mr Strode[?] that Mr Barry be admitted, a Member of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution." This is the first time the full name was mentioned.

<sup>60</sup> While he appears to have joined the members' list in 1873, "his name does not appear in the lists of 1874 and this may have been an oversight, either by Clarke himself, or the compiler of lists. His name again appears as a member in 1875, 1876 (he was by then on the General Committee of management) and [is] not mentioned [on the] 1878 lists." See: '*Transcription of Minutes and Annual Reports as Relating to Marcus Clarke 1876 to 1879*' (2009) compiled by Volunteer Archivists, The Melbourne Athenaeum, p1. The Author would like to record his personal thanks to the Volunteer Archivists at The Melbourne Athenaeum for their work in extracting and transcribing the record of Marcus Clarke's involvement in the workings and development of The Melbourne Athenaeum.

<sup>61</sup> *Transcription* (2009), Ibid, p1.

<sup>62</sup> See: Rickard, John (1976) 'Walch, Garnet' (1843 – 1913), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, (Online Edition), accessed at <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A060361b.htm>

<sup>63</sup> See: 'Garnet Walch' entry in *Victorian Men of The Time*, (1878) M'Carron, Bird, Melbourne, p220.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 220-221.

<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, Walch also lived on the premises as, "In those days" R.W.E Wilmot writes, "there were quarters for a Secretary." See: Wilmot, R.W.E (1939) *The Melbourne Athenaeum 1839-1939: History and Records & The Institution*, Stillwell and Stephens, Melbourne, p35.

<sup>66</sup> See: Rickard, John (1976) 'Walch, Garnet' (1843 – 1913), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, (Online Edition), accessed at <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A060361b.htm>

<sup>67</sup> *Transcription* (2009), p 1.

<sup>68</sup> In 1876.

<sup>69</sup> In 1876, 1877, 1878.

<sup>70</sup> In 1876.

<sup>71</sup> In 1877

<sup>72</sup> In 1877.

<sup>73</sup> In 1876, 1877.

<sup>74</sup> According to the Annual Report of 1876, Marcus Clarke attended 21 meetings of 23 held during the year. See: *Transcription* (2009) Op. Cit, p1.



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<sup>75</sup> It is interesting to note that the Library Sub-Committee was responsible for selecting and purchasing books for the Library and sometimes came into conflict with the General Committee that took exception at books 'being passed into the Library' without their approval. A note of censorship appears to be hinted in this procedure. As noted in *Transcription* (2009), "At each monthly meeting of the General Committee of Management the Library Sub-Committee submitted a report which gave details of amounts spent at various publishers; titles were not given. Some minutes refer to the books being placed on the table but it's hard to tell if this was a regular custom." See: *Transcription* (2009) Op. Cit, pp 1 and 7 generally.

<sup>76</sup> *Transcription* (2009), Ibid, p 10.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p 11.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p11.

<sup>79</sup> *The Argus*, 13 February 1877,p5.

<sup>80</sup> *Transcription* (2009), Ibid, p2.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p 8.

<sup>82</sup> Interestingly the *Rules of The Melbourne Athenaeum* (1876) also contains a detailed "List of Newspapers and Periodicals supplied to The Reading Room of The Melbourne Athenaeum." See *Rules of The Melbourne Athenaeum* (1876) M'Carron, Bird & Co, Melbourne (copy held in the Archives of The Melbourne Athenaeum), pp 3 and 11.

<sup>83</sup> Rule 50 A was in fact inserted to expressly stipulate that the "reading room and library of reference" be closed on Sundays. See *Rules of The Melbourne Athenaeum* (1876) M'Carron, Bird & Co, Melbourne (copy held in the Archives of The Melbourne Athenaeum).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p 8.

<sup>85</sup> *Transcription* (2009) Op. Cit,p 6.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p5.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p5.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p 13.

<sup>89</sup> Personal communication with Marjorie Dalvean, Volunteer Archivist, The Melbourne Athenaeum, 21 August 2009.

<sup>90</sup> *Transcription* (2009), Ibid, pp 24-25.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p4.

<sup>92</sup> See: Burt, Sandra (2001) Op. Cit, p 55-60 at p 55.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p55.

<sup>94</sup> Clarke undoubtedly 'held court' at the Library and it is consistent with his character to suggest that he saw it as a kind of private fiefdom. As the legend goes, Clarke would leave an unfinished cigar in the mouth of one of the stone lions that once adorned the entrance to the Library as an indicating signal to his friends "... that he was at his post at the library." On this anecdote see: McCrae, Hugh (1948) *Story-book Only*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney.

<sup>95</sup> Clarke as announced in his final '*Peripatetic Philosopher*' column on 11 June 1870. See Elliot (1958), p169.

<sup>96</sup> See: Burt, Sandra (2001) Op. Cit, p 55-60 at p 57.

<sup>97</sup> Elliot (1958) Op. Cit, p176.

<sup>98</sup> Catalogue of Sale for Clarke's Library as reprinted in full in McLaren, Ian F. (1982) *Marcus Clarke: An Annotated Bibliography*, Library Council of Victoria,p342

<sup>99</sup> Elliot (1958) Op. Cit, p177. Clarke's Supreme Court Insolvency Files are now located at the Victorian Public Records Office. According to Elliot (1958), these are files 71/1202 and 71/3671. See Elliot (1958) '*Bibliography: I Official Documents and Letters*,' p 268.

<sup>100</sup> See: Wannan (1963) Op. Cit, xv.

<sup>101</sup> See: Elliot (1958) Op. Cit, p 248.

<sup>102</sup> See: Wilding (1977) Op. Cit, p42.

<sup>103</sup> Cyril Hopkins – brother of famous poet Gerard Manley Hopkins – was a contemporary of Marcus Clarke's at the Highgate School "...one of the many small grammar schools which expanded vigorously during the nineteenth century..." and was founded by Sir Richard Chomley in the late sixteenth century. See: Elliot (1958) Op. Cit, p14.

<sup>104</sup> See Herganhan (1972) Op. Cit, at xix on this point.

<sup>105</sup> Reprinted in Wannan (1963) Op. Cit, pp3-7.

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<sup>106</sup>As quoted in Hamilton Mackinnon: *Marcus Clarke*, Op. Cit. See also: Elliot (1958) at 182. This autobiographical passage – also reproduced in Elliot (1958) – is apparently taken from a column by Clarke entitled ‘Fantoccini’ as written in the *Australasian Sketcher*.

<sup>107</sup> Wannan (1963) Op. Cit, p xv.

<sup>108</sup> See: Hamilton Mackinnon: *Marcus Clarke*, Op. Cit, n.p.

<sup>109</sup> A copy is held at the State Library of Victoria La Trobe Reading Room Australiana Collection (Rare Book). Call Number: RARELT 819.98 C554M see: <http://catalogue.slv.vic.gov.au/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=1863914> as accessed at 2 September 2009.

<sup>110</sup> The unveiling of Clarke’s monument is documented in *The West Australian*, Wednesday 3 August 1898, p 4 as having taken place in Melbourne on 2 August. Original text available at <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article3204251> as accessed at 17 August 2009.

<sup>111</sup> See: Elliot (1958), Op. Cit, p 253.

<sup>112</sup> No better evidence of this is seen in Clarke’s *Obituary* in *The Argus* entitled DEATH OF MR. MARCUS CLARKE on *Wednesday 3 August 1881* which is unflattering to his memory [at least to my mind] to say the least: “...His gift of fluency, and his facility for literary expression, although variable in themselves, were probably antagonistic to him as regards his making for himself the enduring reputation which might have been secured by works demanding greater deliberation of purpose and execution, more sustained thought and steadier application. There was in his case a waste of intellectual power, owing to its distribution over a wide surface instead of its being concentrated on some important work and strengthened and disciplined by high endeavour.” at p 7. The entry, however appears to have some basic facts wrong; Clarke is cited as being *34 years old* rather than 35 and is cited as having been born in *1867* rather than 1846.